

Chapter 4 – Consultation and Coordination

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CHAPTER 4 - CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM

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FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL AGENCIES:

Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

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TRIBES:

Klamath Tribes

OTHERS:

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Comments/Responses from 30-Day Comment Period

A 30-day public comment period was provided on a Preliminary EA detailing the proposed action and alternatives to it from September 11, 2011 till October 11, 2011. Comments were received from one organization, Oregon Wild. Forest Service consideration and response to their comments is provided below.

1. *Thinned areas enjoy increased tree vigor and growth and high quality habitat for species that prefer more open forests, while unthinned areas provide habitat for wildlife that prefer dense forest and abundant snags and dead wood, e.g., marten, goshawk, pileated woodpecker, black-backed woodpecker, three-toed woodpecker, more carbon storage, less soil disturbance, and cooler, moister microclimate. It would not be appropriate to treat every acre, nor leave every acre untreated. The optimum ecological outcome is found somewhere in the middle. The NEPA analysis should seek and find (through logical rationale and quantitative methods) the optimum amount of untreated areas across the landscape and within treatment areas. The FS should identify explicit objectives such as DecAID 50-80+% tolerance levels, and retain enough untreated areas to meet those objectives over both the short- and long-term.*

Response:

Thinning will occur on about 18,700 acres of the 24,700 forested acres (about 75%) in the project area. About 960 acres of Forest Plan old growth lodgepole allocated for black-backed and three-toed woodpecker will remain untreated. The HRV (Historic Range of Variability) analysis for the project found that historically about 12-15% of the area would have been in Late-Seral Multilayer forest, while about 53-80% would have been in Late-Seral Single Layer forest (EA page 21). Currently 60% of the area is in Late-Seral Multilayer forest, well about HRV. Only 2% is in Late-Seral Single Layer forest at this time, which is well below HRV. After thinning treatment, about 17% of the area will be in Late-Seral Multilayer forest, while about 45% will be Late Seral Single Layer forest. Post-treatment conditions will be much closer to historic conditions. By managing habitat within HRV it is assumed that adequate habitat will be provided because species survived those levels of habitat in the past to be present today. The further current conditions deviate from HRV the less likely adequate habitat is being provided to sustain those species using the habitat (R6 USDA Forest Service, *A Guide to the Interpretation and Use of the DecAID Adviser*, March 2011).

2. *As elevation increase and stands become more moist, the fraction of the landscape left untreated should increase to account for the characteristic mixed severity, mixed frequency fire behavior, and to account for the fact that mixed conifer stands historically had higher levels of snags and dead wood, compared to dry Ppine stands.*

Response:

Mixed conifer (pine associated) stands occur on and east of Spodue Mountain in this project. The proposed treatments here are in response to the need for action to remedy the altered conditions of these stands that have resulted from exclusion of fire. These mixed conifer stands are at greatest risk of stand replacement crown fire (EA page 34, Figure 3-2). The purpose of proposed treatments is to focus on protecting and enhancing LOS/old growth stands while creating conditions that are sustainable in the face of climate change. Prescriptions for mixed conifer stands will retain higher basal areas of green trees in addition to the 5-15% untreated (skips) areas. The largest and old trees

and existing snags and down wood will be retained providing for short term and long term needs related to snags and dead wood.

3. *The proposed plan amendment allowing removal of large white fir over 21" dbh must be tightly constrained to ensure that the goal of the screens is not compromised. The FS must develop unambiguous criteria to retain large white fir when they are old, and where large trees structure is in short supply, and where necessary to meet ecologically credible snag recruitment goals. We can support limited instances where large white fir are removed when the tree is in direct competition (within 2x the radius of the dripline) with another larger tree of a preferred species like Ponderosa pine, white pine, or sugar pine. See proposed criteria for removing large trees from the Burnt Willow Project. In a large project like this, additional management options should be considered such as killing and retaining on-site many of the large white firs to enhance snag habitat. We urge the Forest Service to establish clear criteria for removal of large trees and use an example like the Burnt Willow Project on the Fremont-Winema National Forest.*

Response:

For the most part, large tree structure is not in short supply in the Black Hills Project area (EA page 3-20). The proposed Forest Plan Amendment to allow removal of white fir trees greater than 21" dbh is for the purpose of promoting restoration and retention of old ponderosa and sugar pine trees. The younger ingrowth of white fir trees that have resulted from a lack of periodic fires would be the focus for removal. Large white fir would generally be retained except where an occasional tree is competing with a ponderosa or sugar pine tree that are the focus of ecological restoration in these dry forest sites. Very few if any old white fir, that have always existed as a component of these stands, will be removed. Additional criteria that clarify this objective have been added to the final EA (page 2-3).

4. *We support meadow enhancement and aspen enhancement treatments, but we urge the FS to consider and make greater use of non-commercial treatments like prescribed fire or felling and leaving conifers. The proposed treatment of the lodgepole/aspen stand that we visited on the field trip left us a little uncomfortable. Stands like this should not be treated by removing all the lodgepole. Many of the lodgepole should be retained as scattered live or dead trees, both to enhance dead wood habitat and to protect small aspen from large herbivores. Untreated skips should also be retained in the mixed aspen/lodgepole areas.*

Response:

Non-commercial treatments would be utilized where appropriate in meadow or aspen areas that have a minor component of encroaching conifers or where prescribed fire is needed to regenerate older aspen stands. There may be some misunderstanding of the proposed treatment of the lodgepole/aspen stand that was visited on the field trip, as there is no intent to remove all the lodgepole. For example, in the mixed old growth lodgepole/aspen stand visited on the field trip approximately 50% of the stand would be treated with openings ½ to 1½ acre in size focused around aspen in the stand. Untreated skips (heavily stocked patches, about 50% of the stand) and existing snags would be retained (EA page 2-9 and 2-10). A portion of the cut trees would be retained on site to provide wildlife cover and protection to young aspen (EA page 2-4). The majority of these aspen stands that have been encroached by lodgepole have existing quantities of dead and down wood that would be retained on site. Leaving too much down material on site will inhibit aspen sprouting and

growth. The objective is to create sustainable conditions where aspen can be a thriving component on this landscape.

5. *The FS should evaluate the effects of nearby roads and ditches on aspen stands and see if there is anything that can be done to move toward natural hydrologic conditions.*

Response: Many road improvement activities are included in this project. These actions are expected to improve hydrologic conditions as they relate to roads.

6. *Thinning in RHCAs should be very limited so as to avoid adversely affecting recruitment of wood for both aquatic and terrestrial species.*

Response:

Thinning in RHCAs is designed to develop desired vegetation characteristics (trees for shade and large wood, and healthy shrubs and herbaceous vegetation) to obtain Riparian Management Objectives of INFISH and the Forest Plan (EA page 3-49, 3-63, 3-67, 3-69).

7. *Tables 3-19, 3-20, and 3-21 show snag densities over time after treatment. These results seem to disagree with other simulations. It would be good to understand why. Trees grow and die in a similar fashion around the state. What accounts for the differences? For other examples, see Heiken, D. 2010. Dead Wood Response to Thinning: Some Examples from Modeling Work. http://dl.dropbox.com/u/47741/dead_wood_slides_2.pdf*

Response:

The difference between what is presented in the Black Hills Project EA snag tables and what has been provided as examples of other work around the state of Oregon are that the stands in this project are not young (30 – 90 yr. old) even-aged douglas fir plantations. While most stands in this project have experienced some level of harvest in the past, they remain capable of producing large snags in the near future and beyond.

8. *The estimates of future snag density shown in Figures 3-19 – 3-20 do not provide assurance that DecAID 50-80+% tolerance levels will be met over time as shown in Appendix C, Table 7. Current snag densities are far too low to support healthy populations of most cavity associated species as shown in Table 8 in Appendix C. Removing commercial-sized trees across 19,000 acres would seem to make a bad situation worse, but this is not clearly conveyed in the EA. The “snag summary” on page 7 of Appendix C relies on 5-15% untreated skips to mitigate for the effects of logging on snag habitat, but there is no analysis to show whether 5-15% is adequate to meet biological objectives for snag-associated species.*

Response:

There is no requirement to meet a particular DecAID tolerance level. Information presented in the EA on current snag densities (Tables 3-19 – 3-21 pg. 76 and Table 5 Appendix C pg 3) show that total snag numbers of 10” and less are above the DecAID 50-80+% tolerance levels shown in Appendix C, Table 7. Total snags greater than 19.7” are above the DecAID 50% tolerance levels shown in Appendix C, Table 7 except for pileated woodpecker and Williamson’s sapsucker. This does not represent a “bad situation” that would be made worse by the proposed treatments. Post-

treatment information in EA Tables 3-19 – 3-21 show that the total number of snags 18” and less would be above the DecAID 50% tolerance levels shown in Appendix C, Table 7. Total snags greater than 20” would vary over the years, but would meet the 80% tolerance levels, with the exception of pileated woodpecker and Williamson’s sapsucker. The 50-80% tolerance level does not and never did occur evenly distributed across the landscape. Snags at this density are typical of patch mortality. Existing snags will be retained, large old trees that can become snags will be retained and clumps of trees and 5-15% untreated skips will be retained. While managing stands to more closely reflect the historic range of variability will likely reduce large scale disturbances which produce a pulse of numerous snags, opportunities for patch and single tree mortality snag creation will still exist across the landscape.

9. *For assurances about snag habitat and population viability, the EA repeatedly relies on the forest plan standards which are outdated (EA pp 77, 79).*

Response:

There is no reliance on the outdated Forest Plan snag habitat standards for assurances of snag levels or population viability, rather the statements referred to relate to the requirement for consistency with the Forest Plan. The Forest Plan uses the concept of biological potential or potential population, which have been criticized (Rose et al. 2001), however projects are still required to meet those standards that are in the Forest Plan. Analysis and disclosure of snag habitat conditions is provided by the discussions of primary cavity excavators in Chapter 3 of the EA and in Appendix C, DecAID Information.

10. *The analysis of effects to certain wildlife fails to disclose the effects of the no action alternative compared to the action alternative. For instance, the black-backed woodpecker would likely benefit greatly from the small tree mortality described in Table 3-19, but this is not mentioned in the narrative analysis on pp 78-79. Likewise, the analysis does not disclose the long-term adverse effects of the action alternatives on black-backed woodpeckers relative to the baseline, no action alternative.*

Response:

Discussion of effects of the no action alternative to some wildlife species, including woodpeckers occurs on EA pages 3-72, 3-73. The analysis recognizes that thinning stands would result in fewer snags being created through natural processes such as fire and beetle kills (EA page 3-79). Alternatively, no action would provide for greater mortality and snag creation in the short term, but would put habitat for the long term at risk (EA page 3-80).

11. *The analysis repeatedly refers to abundant habitat outside the project area to mitigate for the effects of management within the project area. This is not really an appropriate way to analyze the effects of a landscape management project of this scale and intensity, especially when the FS plans many more large scale projects like this in the areas being referred to for mitigation purposes (e.g. Deuce Project and many others). Looking outside of the project area might be sensible when reviewing small projects, but this is not a small project. It’s a landscape scale project with a large fraction of the landscape proposed for treatment. The FS should disclose the effects of logging on habitat within this project area. After 19,000 acres of logging, will the project area still contribute meaningful levels of habitat to support viable populations of species*

(such as marten, goshawk, and woodpeckers) that need dense forest and high levels of snags and dead wood?

Response: See response to comment 1, 8 and 9.

12. We urge the FS to avoid road construction because even temporary roads tend to have long-term impacts. Inaccessible areas can be treated non-commercially, or used to meet goals related to carbon, dense forest, snags, etc.

Response: To the extent practical, development of temporary roads would be avoided. It is expected that there would occasionally be a need for a short temporary spur road (< .25 mi.) to allow for access or to provide for locating a landing in the most ideal location, thereby protecting resources.

13. The EA lacked any site specific analysis of the effects of proposed new road construction. Road construction has a potentially high level of site specific and long-term impacts that depend on site characteristics like soil type, slope, aspect, vegetation, proximity to water, proximity to weeds, etc. (as well as site specific aspects of the proposed road: width, surface, gradient, etc).

Response: The project area contains five primary soil types, four hydrologic groups (EA pg. 3-43), three perennial streams (EA pg. 3-47) and 10 weed (invasive species) sites (EA pg. 3-111). Development of temporary roads is constrained by application of BMPs (Best Management Practices, EA Appendix B) and specific project design and resource Protection Measures (EA pg. 2-11) to minimize impacts to resources.

14. Oregon Wild supports the recommendation for road closure and decommissioning on Figure 2-5 of the PEA, but the EA did not provide much of a description of proposed road closures and decommissioning. If the decision-maker is going to adopt a decision that closes roads, that proposal needs to be clearly described and the benefits and effects disclosed.

Response: The proposed road closures and decommissioning are described in the EA on page 5 of Chapter 2, shown on Map Figure 2-5, and on the table in Appendix A of the EA. The effects of these actions are disclosed in Chapter 3 of the EA on pages 50, 62, 63, 65, 66, 68, 69, 77, 78, 79, 82, 86, 91, 102, 109, 110. It is not clear what other details could be included in the descriptions that would add value to the analysis.

15. Maybe the lack of analysis of roads was related to the fact that this is a Preliminary EA. If so, it points out for us the problem with sending out for public review incomplete NEPA analyses. The public should be informed of and be able to comment on all relevant aspects of a project.

Response: We make every effort to maintain an open and inclusive public process when planning projects and to provide the public with complete NEPA analyses documents for review and comment.

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